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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SKOPJE 000451

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STATE FOR EUR/SCE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/12/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV MK

SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: ETHNIC ALBANIAN LEADERS ON ELECTIONS
AND KOSOVO STATUS

REF: A. SKOPJE 373

¶B. SKOPJE 420

SUMMARY and COMMENT

¶1. (C) During separate meetings May 4, the Ambassador told DUI and DPA leaders Ali Ahmeti and Arben Xhaferi, respectively, to refrain from importing K-Albanian "muscle" to assist them during upcoming parliamentary elections. She reiterated the USG position on Macedonia-Kosovo border demarcation and asked both leaders to refrain from further public comment on the matter. She reminded both men that the 2001 Skopje-Belgrade agreement delimiting the border was not subject to renegotiation.

¶2. (C) Both leaders denied they intended to rely on K-Albanian "muscle" to assist them during the election, and pledged to adhere to democratic norms during the political campaign. DPA Vice President Thaci admitted there were eAlbanian "extremists" amidst the DPA ranks, but argued it was easier to control them if they remained inside the party.

On border demarcation, both Ahmeti and Xhaferi said they agreed the matter should remain a technical matter, rather than becoming a political issue in the election campaign.

¶3. (C) Anecdotal evidence indicates that DUI and DPA, despite their protestations to the contrary, have imported K-Albanian "muscle" to assist them in the elections. Such K-Albanian involvement could lead to electoral fraud and violence, damaging Macedonia's democratic system and near-term prospects for NATO membership. It would be useful if local authorities in Tirana and Pristina strongly urged K-Albanian political parties to avoid providing such "reinforcements" to their eAlbanian counterparts in Macedonia, and to recall those already here. End Summary and Comment.

MEETING WITH eALBANIAN LEADERS IN TETOVO

¶4. (U) Ambassador met separately with DUI (ethnic Albanian governing coalition junior partner) President Ali Ahmeti and DPA (main ethnic Albanian opposition party) President Arben Xhaferi on May 4 in Tetovo. Ahmeti was accompanied by DUI Vice President Agron Buxhaku. Xhaferi was joined by DPA Vice President Menduh Thaci. DCM and P/E Chief (notetaker)

accompanied the Ambassador.

GETTING THE WORD OUT ON FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

¶15. (SBU) Ahmeti told the Ambassador that DUI's grassroots organization for the electoral campaign was taking shape. Party staffers covering areas where DUI would contend for parliamentary seats would spread the message regarding the need to conduct "proper elections" and to ensure high turnout. He was confident there would be few problems on election day.

DEMOCRATIC PROCEDURES THE ONLY WAY FORWARD

¶16. (SBU) Xhaferi, asserting that DPA had "accepted democratic procedures as the only way forward" in the elections, said the party viewed free and fair elections as the sole way to validate the political legitimacy of the state. Commenting that DUI's "unrealistically high percentage of votes" received in last year's local elections had undermined the legitimacy of the democratic process, Xhaferi complained that the international community's reaction to DPA's subsequent complaints had been too "soft."

DPA CAMPAIGN -- NO "NEURALGIC" THEMES

¶17. (C) Xhaferi said DPA would not campaign with themes that are "neuralgic" to eMacedonians (e.g., the name dispute with Greece and other identity issues). The party would question Ali Ahmeti's moral authority, and would attack DUI's alleged failure to ensure implementation of the Framework Agreement. It also would focus on economic equality for eAlbanians by tackling "systemic obstacles" to eAlbanian investment.

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¶18. (C) Thaci added that DPA would not directly attack ruling SDSM during the campaign, since "that would raise its poll ratings." The party would seek to show through its professional cadres that it was ready to enter government and to work effectively as a coalition partner. He blamed DUI's lack of professional staff for its alleged failure to implement the FWA.

KOSOVAR "MUSCLE" TO INFLUENCE ELECTIONS?

¶19. (C) The Ambassador raised with Ahmeti rumors circulating in international community circles that DUI had imported Kosovar Albanian "muscle" to help the party during the campaign, and said she hoped the rumors were unfounded. If true, she said, the USG would expect DUI to send such forces back to Kosovo immediately. She repeated that message to Xhaferi and Thaci, adding that the elections should be viewed as a political, not a physical, contest. Kosovar Albanian involvement in Macedonia's political process would reflect poorly on all eAlbanians, including those in Kosovo.

NO NEED FOR K-ALBANIAN HELP?

¶10. (C) Ahmeti denied that DUI had employed K-Albanians to interfere in the elections. He added that the party had never used such forces in the past; it did not need them now. Ahmeti admitted there were some Kosovar associates of DUI living in Macedonia, such as Emrush Suma, but he would soon return to Kosovo. At any rate, he had forbidden Suma from interfering in the electoral campaign. Ahmeti noted that DUI enjoyed good relations with eAlbanian parties in both Pristina and Tirana, and that the party had declined recent offers of assistance from several of them.

¶11. (C) DPA's Thaci said that the party was working with counterparts in Tirana and Pristina to urge them to press eAlbanians in Macedonia to work for free and fair elections. DPA had told authorities in Pristina that Kosovar Albanians in Macedonia who might interfere in the electoral process would "not be allowed to remain here." The expulsion of

Kosovar Albanian political groups from Macedonia would, Thaci contended, "reduce by 50 percent" the number of election fraud incidents on election day. (Note: Thaci later provided us with a list -- forwarded to the Department -- of the K-Albanians DPA claims will be employed by DUI during the elections. End Note.)

DPA's HOMEGROWN "MUSCLE"

¶12. (C) Thaci admitted that some local DPA members, such as former UCK member Daut Rexhepi-Leka and criminal gang leader Agim Krasniqi, had "extremist backgrounds," but he tried to assure the Ambassador that he could control them. It was better for such persons to be "inside the DPA tent than to operate outside of it," he said.

¶13. (C) Thaci pledged that DPA would "take responsibility for the behavior of our troops," claiming that the party's strict hierarchy would make that possible. At the same time, he said, "DPA followers are courageous and will clash with DUI's Kosovars if problems arise." If the Kosovars left before the elections, that "balance of power" would not be necessary.

KOSOVO STATUS AND BORDER DEMARCTION

¶14. (C) Referring to recent statements by DUI and especially by DPA leaders that had muddied the waters on demarcation of the Macedonia-Kosovo border, the Ambassador restated the US position on the matter, underscoring that it should be resolved as part of a final status solution for Kosovo. In the meantime, it would be prudent for all parties to avoid making public statements about the matter. It was especially important to keep border demarcation from becoming an issue in the upcoming electoral campaign.

¶15. (C) Ahmeti noted that he had recently discussed the demarcation issue with Kosovar authorities, and conceded that Kosovar PM Ceku had made some "extreme" statements on the

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matter, perhaps under pressure from hardliners. The main concern, in his view, was to ensure that Kosovo maintained and improved its relations with Macedonia throughout the final status process. As the status talks process progressed, it was important not to allow demarcation, which "could be completed at the appropriate time," to become a major political distraction.

¶16. (C) Ahmeti slammed DPA leader Xhaferi's visit to Kosovo the previous week as "unfruitful" for having stirred Kosovar emotions over the demarcation issue. He noted that actual demarcation could lead to violent reactions on the part of eAlbanian citizens living in the border region who did not want to live on Macedonian soil. The Ambassador made it clear that the 2001 Skopje-Belgrade border delimitation agreement was not subject to renegotiation. What needed to be done was a technical demarcation of the existing border. It was important, therefore, to keep the issue off the status process agenda for now. Ahmeti agreed, adding that a "technical MOU" on demarcation might help resolve the matter.

¶17. (C) Xhaferi argued that press reports about his statements on the border issue during a recent visit to Pristina had inaccurately characterized his position. In fact, he had said that Pristina could not resolve the demarcation issue at the present time because Kosovo still had no international legal standing to do so.

KONDOVO AND KRASNIQI CANDIDACY

¶18. (C) Thaci said that the early March police raid on Kondovo, which left one eAlbanian dead and one seriously wounded, had sorely tested DPA's crisis management skills, but that the party had managed to control the eAlbanian reaction and to prevent further violence. He said he had

chastised Krasniqi for having harbored the three criminals involved, and said the notorious Kondovo gang leader would not, contrary to earlier reports, be included on DPA's list of candidates for parliament.

CONTROVERSIAL MONUMENT CONSTRUCTION

¶19. (SBU) The Ambassador asked whether the DUI-led Struga municipality would obey a recent local court order prohibiting construction of a controversial monument to a deceased former NLA and DUI member, the plan for which already had raised inter-ethnic tensions there. Ahmeti blamed the inter-ethnic fracas over the monument on the Struga mayor's inexperience. He said he had persuaded backers of the monument project to temporarily suspend work on it, and pledged that the issue would be resolved after the parliamentary elections. The Ambassador noted the importance to Struga's economic prospects, particularly its touristic appeal, of resolving the issue peacefully.

COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST

¶20. (C) Although both DUI and DPA deny that they plan to use Kosovar Albanians to "assist" them during the elections, anecdotal evidence, including from OSCE field observers, indicates that both parties already have Kosovar "reinforcements" on the ground here. K-Albanian involvement in the Macedonian electoral process would likely result in isolated electoral fraud and violent clashes, given the heated campaign climate and DPA's "do or die" approach to winning. Such an outcome would damage the democratic process here and would jeopardize Macedonia's chances for NATO membership in the next two years. It also could have negative regional repercussions, with political leaders in Belgrade using such involvement to charge that K-Albanians are destabilizing the neighborhood.

¶21. (C) Embassy is raising this issue at IC Principals' meetings to ensure the IC here uses similar language and arguments in admonishing DUI and DPA. It would be particularly useful, therefore, if local authorities in Tirana and Pristina would strongly urge K-Albanian political

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parties to avoid providing such "reinforcements" to their eAlbanian counterparts in Macedonia, and to recall those already here.

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